INSPIRING CREATIVE WRITING AT KEY STAGE 2

Over the last couple of years, the RSC has been running playwriting projects in primary schools. Our aim is to use Shakespeare's plays as inspiration for learners' original writing. These online resources are not designed to form a complete workshop plan, but they are exercises you might want to try in the classroom.

Hermia (Sinead Keenan) wakes up alone in the forest (2005 RSC production)

FOCUS ON *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*

While being a very accessible play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has many characters, plots and subplots. Our primary aim in a writing project is not necessarily to communicate all these elements, but to draw out characters, themes and techniques which will be useful as inspirational starting points for the learners' own creative writing.

Our aim is to enable learners to:

- create their own characters by examining one of Shakespeare's characters
- create their own imaginative world by exploring Shakespeare's settings
- structure stories by following a strand of Shakespeare's plot

The characters we will work with are Hermia, Puck and Bottom, as they have accessible and interesting personalities and stories:

- Hermia runs away from home after arguing with her father, and her story also deals with relationships and friendship.
- Puck is a powerful trickster who works for the king of the fairies and doesn't like strangers invading his home, the forest.
- Bottom loves to be the centre of attention and wants to be an actor, but gets more than he bargained for when he is made king for a day and it seems his dreams have come true.

For some exercises, you will be able to select the character you would like to work with.

EXERCISE 1 – Reading a script

Choose whether you will concentrate on Hermia, Puck or Bottom. On the next pages are three scenes, each corresponding to one of these characters. Read and perform the scene for your character to introduce him/her and the opening premise of his/her story.

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Hermia's scene

(A royal palace. It is very grand and cold. Hermia enters with her father Egeus.)

Hermia Father, please listen to me. Please don't drag me in front of the king.

Egeus (strictly) Come on, young lady. Keep up!

Hermia But I haven't done anything wrong.

Egeus Humph. Yet! It's lucky I've been keeping an eye on you.
(to the audience) Daughters eh! More trouble than they're worth.

Hermia Father, pleeeeease don't make me marry Demetrius. He's horrible. I can't. I won't!

Egeus Oh but you will. The king will make you see sense.

Hermia But what about Lysander? He's …

Egeus (shouting) Not another word about that … boy.

Hermia (to the audience) You should see him. He's so cute!

Egeus Hermia, you will marry Demetrius.

Hermia (stamping her foot) I won't, I won't!

Egeus I am your father. I am only trying to do what's best for you.

Hermia Yeah, right.

Egeus You owe me respect, young lady. I should be like a god to you. You do realise that the punishment for disobeying your father is death, don't you?

Hermia Well, yeah … but you wouldn't go that far.

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(pause) Would you?

Egeus Just watch me.

Hermia: Dad!

Egeus I know that Lysander has been sending you letters and presents, don't think you can keep any secrets from me.

Hermia (to the audience) He has! Look at this bracelet …

Egeus I've heard him singing love-songs at your window under the moon. But enough is enough. I've had Demetrius in mind for you for a long time now. A very nice boy.

Hermia Oh, father. If only you could see them both through my eyes! I bet I know which one you'd choose then.

Egeus (sighing) You're young. And very silly. One day you'll thank me.

Hermia No *way.*

Egeus Right, we mustn't keep the king waiting. Follow me.

(he marches out)

Hermia (to audience) What am I going to do? I love Lysander, I can't be with anyone else. I know! We could run away, run through the forest where no-one can find us. Far from my father and stupid Demetrius. What a good plan. I must find Lysander!

(she runs off)

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Puck's scene

(It is night-time in a strange forest. The moon is red. Wild animals rustle and roar deep within the wood. Puck flies in.)

Puck (to the audience) I've just had such a laugh! There's so much fun to be had on a visit to the city with all those stupid humans in it. The best one today was when I turned myself into a chair and then just when someone was about to sit down on me, I disappeared. (laughs) She fell down BANG. You should have seen her face!

(Oberon enters)

Oberon (sternly) Puck! Where have you been?

Puck Oh, nowhere King Oberon. I'm always right here in the forest, ready and waiting to serve you.

(Puck bows)

Oberon Hmm. I hope you haven't been up to your tricks again.

Puck (smiling sweetly) Oh, not me, your majesty. Good as gold, me.

Oberon Right, then. I need your help. Do you remember a flower I once showed you in the mountains?

Puck Erm ...

Oberon Purple. Small. Remember?

Puck Ooo ...

Oberon (to the audience) Servants can be so useless at times.

Puck Small, purple. Is that the one?

Oberon (sighs) Yes, Puck.

Puck Great, yes, sure thing, got it.

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Oberon Well, that flower has a secret.

(Oberon pauses and paces up and down)

A secret you must keep.

Puck Of course.

Oberon (whispering) That flower has nectar with magical powers! If the juice from the flower is squeezed on someone's eyelids while they sleep, that person will fall madly in love with the first living creature they see when they wake.

Puck (loudly) You're joking!

Oberon Sssh. Even if it's a bear or a monkey, the magic juice will make the sleeper love it.

Puck (to the audience) A love potion. *Yes!* This is going to be fun.

Oberon The mountains are far away but I want you to go quickly and pick me one of these flowers.

Puck No problem. I can get round the earth in forty minutes.

Oberon Wonderful. I have a plan to make some trouble myself. My wife Titania needs to be taught a lesson. Now hurry, go!

(Oberon leaves rubbing his hands together)

Puck (sadly to the audience) Poor Queen Titania. They're always fighting. But I can't say no to King Oberon, he's my master. (smiling) And I have my own ideas about using that potion. It could help me show all those humans who come into the forest who's boss here. I'm off!

(Puck disappears)

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Bottom's scene

(It is evening in a field at the edge of the city. The moon is full. A dark, whispering forest is nearby. Peter enters with a large bag.)

Peter (to the audience) Ah, yes. A perfect spot for our rehearsal. We don't want anyone in the city to find out what we're up to. It's going to be a surprise!

(Bottom rushes in)

Bottom (panting) Not late am I, Peter?

Peter No, Bottom, early. Very early.

Bottom Phew! I wouldn't want to miss anything. I'm so excited! So, have you decided which part in the play I'm going to play? I really want to start practising because practice makes perfect.

Peter Yes, Bottom, I've cast all the parts. Hard job, but someone had to do it.

Bottom (to the audience) Pleeeeeease let me be the main part. I *am* the best actor round here, you know.

Peter I've given you the part of Phil.

Bottom Phil? Okay. So is that the main part then?

Peter Yeah, he's the hero, Bottom. Great death scene.

Bottom (punching the air) Oh, *yes*! You won't regret this, Peter. I'll make you proud. I'll make the audience cry. Look, look …

(Bottom staggers around pretending to die)

Peter Yes, yes, very good, Bottom.

Bottom So who are the other lads playing then? And where are they all anyway?

Peter You were early, remember? Now, let me see. (he looks in his bag and pulls out a list) Well, Frank is going to play Tina, Phil's true love.

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Bottom A woman?

Peter Yes, Bottom.

Bottom I can't see Frank as a woman at all. I could do it, though. Look … (he flicks his hair like a woman)

Peter No, you're Phil, Bottom. You can't be his girlfriend as well. Where was I? Ah yes, Tom is going to play the lion.

Bottom The lion?

Peter Yes, Bottom.

Bottom But Tom is much too shy to make a good lion. Why don't you let me be the lion? I can roar really well!

Peter But you'd scare the audience.

Bottom Never. I could roar as sweetly as a little bird. Listen …

Peter (loudly) Enough! (to the audience) Bottom can be a very annoying guy. (to Bottom) You can only play one part. And that is FINAL.

(pause)

Bottom Fine. I know when I'm not wanted.

(Bottom starts to walk off)

Peter Bottom, Bottom, I'm sorry. Of course we want you to be in our play. I'm just a bit stressed at the moment.

Bottom Okay, I accept. Give me a script and I'll start learning my lines.

(Peter gives him a script)

Thanks, Peter. I'll just take it into the forest so I can get some peace and quiet. Give us a shout when the others are here and we're ready to start.

Peter Alright, Bottom. But don't go too far.

(Bottom walks into the forest)

Bottom (to the audience) It's very dark and strange in here. What was that? Nothing, nothing, be brave, Bottom. Which way have I just come? It all looks the same to me. Peter! (shouts) Peter! (pause) No answer. I think I might be lost!

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Bottom (centre, Malcolm Storry) and the Mechanicals (2005 RSC production)

EXERCISE 2 – Get to know your character

The better you know your characters, the better you will be able to write words and actions for them. Imagine them to be like real people you might meet. Encourage learners to imaginatively engage with the characters' lives with this exercise.

Focussing on the character you picked, talk or write about these:

- describe what you think he or she had for breakfast this morning
- describe and/or draw the character's bedroom
- describe and/or draw the character's most precious object
- describe his or her biggest secret

EXERCISE 3 – Writing stage directions

Stage directions are written in brackets. They are used to:

- describe the scene e.g. (a bedroom, it is raining)
- tell the actors what to do, and sometimes how to do it e.g. (Michael ties up his shoelaces angrily)
- tell the actors how to say a line e.g. (happily)

Writers need to be specific in their use of language. It is much more useful to write 'he slams the door' or 'he carefully closes the door' than simply 'he shuts the door'. Stage directions are important because they let the writer talk to the actors and make sure that the picture in the writer's head can be brought to life on stage. Try the following exercise:

Choose one of the characters from the scene you have just read.

Write stage directions for them – remember to put them in brackets and to be as specific as possible with the words you use - make them powerful.

Watch the group performing some of the stage directions while the rest of group tries to guess what they were.

(N.B. Shakespeare used very few stage directions but they will be very useful in your learners' writing.)

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Theseus (Miles Richardson) and Hippolyta (Bridgitta Roy) in hunting gear (2005 RSC production)

EXERCISE 4 – Writing a speech

Ask learners to write a speech for their character. Read out the start of each line below in turn, giving them a few minutes to complete it. They can use both what they know from the scene and what they imagine to be true about the character. There are no right answers!

My name is …
I love …
I hate …
The best thing about me is …
The worst thing about me is …
One thing I would change about the world is …
I wish …

Remember to think about the way the character speaks. What kind of words would he or she use?

EXERCISE 5 – Writing dialogue

To get started with writing, ask learners to write a 'what happens next?' scene to follow the scene you read in Exercise 1:

Discuss what might happen next.

Choose two characters – could be the same two in the scene or writers could add a new one from what they know of the story.

Decide where this second scene will be set and describe it in an opening stage direction.

Imagine the conversation the characters might have and write it down.

Remember to include stage directions.

Remember to let your characters speak to the audience if they want to, perhaps to share a secret or ask advice.

EXERCISE 6 – Creating your character

Try creating your own character inspired by the one you have chosen of Shakespeare's. Draw a 'character web' – write the character's name in the middle of a blank page and write words around it to build up a good picture of who they are and what they are like. Use these ideas as a guide: Age? Physical appearance? Family? Friends? Personality? Afraid of?

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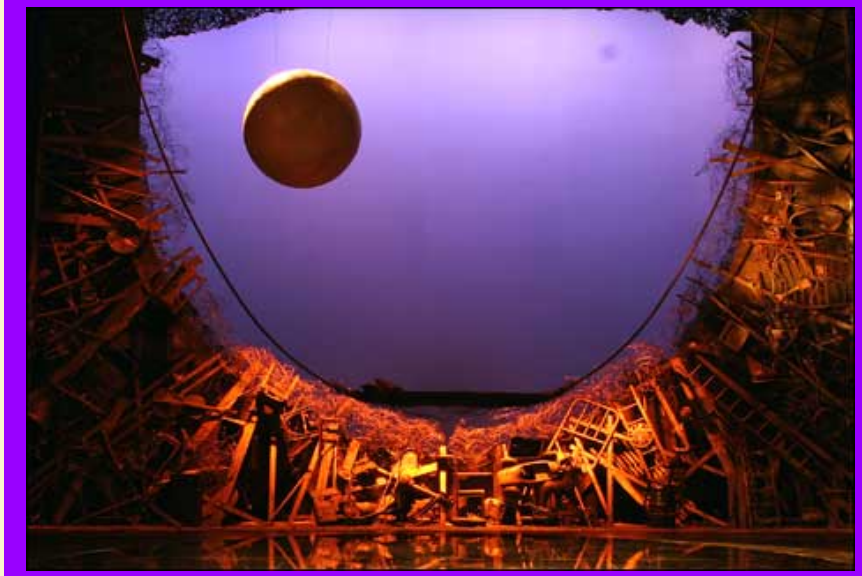
EXERCISE 7 – Creating the world



The fairy world – a junkyard forest and moveable suspended moon (2005 RSC production)

Shakespeare creates a strange, night-time, magical forest world for his play to take place in. Encourage learners to look for places where adventures might happen - with a bit of imagination - in their own lives. Try the exercise relevant to the character you chose in Exercise 1.

Hermia

As a group, list the places we go when we've had an argument or feel sad, where we might run away to, e.g. bedroom, treehouse. Choose one of these and then follow the instructions below.

Puck

As a group, list the places where we feel in charge and safe, e.g. bedroom, treehouse. Choose one of these and then follow the instructions below.

Bottom

As a group, list the places where we've been lost e.g: supermarket, funfair. Choose one of these and then follow the instructions below.

Next steps

Everyone closes their eyes and imagines themselves in this place. What can you see, feel, smell, taste and hear?
List these on the board.

Repeat this but imagine it is the middle of the night and you are in this place alone. Now the familiar place is strange and exciting.

Ask learners to focus on the sounds that might be heard in this place – firstly in the day and then at night.
Turn these ideas into pure sound.

One half of the group creates a 'soundscape' of noises for the place by day while the other half of the group 'visits' this by sitting in the middle with their eyes shut. Then the second group creates the same place by night and the first group visits this experience.

Draw the new world. Write an opening stage direction to set this scene.

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EXERCISE 8 – Recap on script-writing rules

Oberon (Joe Dixon) (2005 RSC production)

For the character you have chosen, read the short paragraph below. Turn this text into a script. Set the scene by writing an opening stage direction (remember to put the stage directions in brackets) and then use stage directions and dialogue to rewrite the paragraph in the format of a play.

Hermia

Hermia and Lysander, hand in hand, ran through the forest as fast as they could go. The trees were wild and the night was dark, and the lovers trembled as they heard the roar of a bear.

"Hermia, I'm scared. Can't we stop and hide here for the night?" said Lysander.

But Hermia, looking around nervously, said, "No, we must go on. My father might be right behind us!"

Puck

King Oberon crept through the midnight forest followed by his servant, Puck. The moon shone, lighting their way to where Queen Titania slept on a bed of leaves.

"Here is the magic flower you asked for, my lord," whispered Puck.

Oberon laughed and said, "Now I will take my revenge".

Bottom

Bottom was led by beautiful Queen Titania through the dark wood. He still didn't know that he had been turned into a donkey. The moon shone, lighting their way to her home made of flowers.

"I will give you fairy servants and a forest feast, my darling," said Titania.

Bottom, laughing with excitement, said, "I've always wanted to live like a king!"

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Bottom (Malcolm Storry) with the fairies (including Stewart Fraser, right) (2005 RSC production)

EXERCISE 9 – Writing a song

Read Shakespeare's fairy song together several times, experimenting with volume and pace:

> You spotted snakes with double tongue,
> Thorny hedgehogs, be not seen;
> Newts and blind-worms, do no wrong,
> Come not near our fairy Queen.
>
> Weaving spiders, come not here;
> Hence, you long-legged spinners, hence.
> Beetles black, approach not near;
> Worm nor snail do no offence.

What do you notice? There are seven syllables per line and alternate lines rhyme.

List what you might be afraid of in your own new world which you created in Exercise 7. Use these to write a song as a group using the template below (i.e. four syllables to add in each line), then see if you can use your song in your script.

> _____ _____ _____ _____, don't come here;
> Stay, you _____ _____ _____ _____, stay.
> _____ _____ _____ _____, don't come near;
> _____ _____ _____ _____ go away.

EXERCISE 10 – Writing rhyming couplets

Shakespeare often uses a rhyming couplet to finish a scene with style and a satisfying sense of closure. Look at the first line of this couplet from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

> **Puck:** I go, I go; look how I go

List words that rhyme with the last word, 'go': e.g. blow, flow, no, know, show, low, hello

The second line of Shakespeare's couplet starts with:

> Swifter than …

Try using one of the rhyming words to write your own second line: e.g. 'Swifter than the rivers flow.'
(Shakespeare's line is: 'Swifter than arrow from the Tartar's bow.')
Have a go at finishing your own scene with a rhyming couplet.

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